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ABSTRACT

Home Economics is a profession which helps families and individuals to improve their quality of life. The majority of families in Kenya live and work in rural areas where facilities and resources are limited. Women provide 60-80% of the farm labor. Despite the hard working conditions, rural women have a major responsibility in promoting the standard of living in rural areas. They need professional help in order to utilize the available resources wisely. Home Economics curriculum at all levels of education should include some subsistence farming, food storage, and utilization and should incorporate family and population concepts in all Home Economics related subjects. There is a need to carry out research and to develop appropriate labor and time saving tools and equipment for the tasks performed by rural women both in their homes and on their farms. Training institutions offering Home Economics should develop outreach programs as an extra-curricular activity to visit and educate the rural community around the institutions. When dealing with an area that is as comprehensive as rural families' welfare, a proper coordination and integration within all the government and non-government agencies working for rural development is needed in order to avoid wasting of resources and to minimize duplication and confusion that would be created in the field. (ABL)

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# THE NATURE OF WORK AND PROBLEMS OF RURAL WOMEN IN KENYA: IMPLICATION FOR HOME ECONOMICS.

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## ABSTRACT

Home Economics is a profession which helps families and individuals to improve their quality of life. The majority of families in Kenya live and work in rural areas where facilities and resources are limited.

Farming is the major activity in the rural areas and rural women provide between 60 - 80% of the farm labour. Despite the hard working conditions, rural women have a major responsibility in promoting the standard of living in the rural areas. They need professional help in order to utilize the available resources wisely. To be able to help rural women improve their efficiency in rural development, there is a great need to understand their activities and problems which is the purpose of this paper. This understanding would help Home Economics professionals redirect their goals and widen their scope to cater for the needs of the rural community.

# THE NATURE OF WORK AND PROBLEMS OF RURAL WOMEN IN KENYA:

## IMPLICATIONS FOR HOME ECONOMICS

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The philosophy of Home Economics profession is to help families and individuals improve their quality of life and become self-reliant. This is accomplished by providing complete education in home making activities to families and by training individuals for employment in Home Economics related occupations. The home economics philosophy in Kenya has further been strengthened by the introduction of the 8-4-4 system which emphasizes on technical education for self-reliance. The major emphasis in Home Economics profession is to equip people with relevant knowledge and skills and to help them acquire the right attitudes about themselves and their families in order to build strong and healthy families and to meet the society's needs for workers in home economics related occupations. Home economics being a family and individual oriented discipline, its programmes at all levels of education are or should be based on the family's needs and the employment needs of the individual.

Due to the rapid environment, economics and social changes in Kenya today, families and individuals are constantly being faced by complex needs and challenges. This necessitates closer and regular scrutiny of society's activities and problems so that Home Economics can widen its scope to come up with solutions to some of the problems facing the Kenyan society.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the activities and the problems of rural women in Kenya and consequently come up with definite suggestions on the role Home Economics profession can play in order to improve efficiency and productivity of such rural communities. The author is particularly interested in rural women because: they form the majority of women in developing countries; they play the crusial role in food production, family welfare, and rural development, and they have limited facilities and resources available to them. The work they do and their problems should therefore, concern Home Economics as well as other professions working towards the welfare of the rural families.

## THE NATURE OF WORK AND PROBLEMS OF THE RURAL WOMEN IN KENYA

Kenya has an agriculturally based economy. The country produces coffee, tea, pyrethrum, cotton, sisal and sugarcane as cash crops. Subsistence crops include maize, beans, potatoes, sorghum, millet, groundnuts and different varieties of fruits and vegetables. Most farmers keep farm animals such as cattle, goats, sheeps, poultry and pigs. Farm families consume most of their products in subsistance farming and sell some to their neighbours and in the local markets.

According to FAO (1975), approximately 95% of agricultural land is owned by small scale farmers who produce about 80% of the country's farm products. The majority of the farm operators are women who traditionally provide between 60-80 percent of the country's farm work while most men work outside their homes for salaried jobs (Palmer, 1977).

According to the 1969 census about 525,000 rural households in Kenya were headed by women. About 400,000 of them had males as the heads of households but they actually lived in towns. Some of them returned home occassionally to organize labour at peak load periods but majority of them did not care how the work was done or who does it. By 1977, rural women made 70-90 percent of women in developing countries. This situation may not have changed much in Kenya today. In such cases women are left to protect and provide daily necessities for themselves and their children.

Rural women have alot of work to do on their farms, homes and in the community though with limited resources and facilities. They spend an average of eight hours per day cultivating crops, feeding and caring for farm animals. In addition to intensive farm labour, food preparation, housekeeping and caring for children, women spend alot of time fetching water and firewood for domestic use. Rural women in Kenya like in many other developing countries have to rely on their personal resources to do what many women in urban areas pay to have done for them (Belk, 1985).

Palmer estimated the rural women's average working hours both in the home, farm and in the community to be between 15-16½ hours per day. Such workload and working conditions are not healthy for women who are frequently pregnant or breast-feeding and most of the times not properly nourished.

Harden (1985) also observed that the creep of modernization both in the home and in the farm is increasing the workload for rural women. If proper personal and environmental sanitation

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has to be maintained and balanced diet provided following proper food hygiene, more water, firewood, labour, and time is required and all this draws from the women's personal resources. Farm modernization has also increased women workload because where mechanization involves both additional labour - intensive work and high productivity work, women are usually left with labour intensive work which is poorly paid or sometimes totally unrenumerated. Together with increasing work burden, modernization has to some extent reduced women's right of appropriation over the family and even their own labour. Even after labouring for many hours in both commercial and subsistance farming, farm returns are usually channeled through male heads of the households as the selling agents of the farm products. This leave women with no control over the farm income. Where there is shortage of land and labour, there is often disagreements between husbands and wives on how to allocate these important and limited factors of production. In most cases husbands increase the acreage of the crops such that the plots left for growing subsistance crops are too small and inadequate to feed the family. In Busia District for example, Muzaale and Leonard (1982) observed that the sugarcane plantation were reducing food production for the family. The money earned from sugarcane was controlled and spent by husbands most of the time on beer. As a result, women were in constant need of money to supplement inadequate food for the family. Women expressed preference for subsistence crops like maize or sorghum which can feed the family and sold for cash to meet other needs. This is only one researched and recorded case but similar problems are familiar in other areas where

commercial crops are grown.

Appropriate technology both in the home and in the farm is still poor. In many cases land preparation, planting, weeding and harvesting operations are done manually except for a few farmers who can afford tractor services or animal ploughs. This makes the farm work too difficult and too slow and also reduce the efficiency in food production.

Lack of enough capital to purchase farm input and to perform tasks needed for farm development is another problem. Farmers may use certified seeds without fertilizer or disease and pests control chemicals. As a result, the production in many farms is less than what families need for self food-sufficiency. Women use public means for delivering farm produce to the market or for carrying inputs to the farm. Most of the rural access roads are not passable especially during the rainy seasons when transportation is mostly needed either to deliver farm inputs or to take the ready crops to the market. Where public means are not available, women carry farm products and inputs to the market and to the farm respectively.

Together with expanding female workload, Kenya has an expanding population. As of 1985, Kenya's fertility rate (average number of children born to a women) was eight. About half of this population was under 14 years of age and therefore dependent (Harden, 1985 and Hancock, 1982). mainly depend on their mothers for food clothing and sometimes school fees and other needs. The high birth rate in

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Kenya is associated with low status of women. Referring to a study by World Bank Agency for International Development Plan and UN Children's Fund, Harden (1985) remarked that "women who do not inherit property, and are deprived of education, create their long term security by bearing children who one day can take care of them". Referring to another survey of anthropological research accross Africa, Harden further said that "women are brought up to believe that bearing children and continuing to bear as long as they are able should be the justification of their existence". As a result of these beliefs and the social pressure, women are forced to have more children when they do not want or even when their health is at risk. A survey done in Kenya in 1984 revealed that about 40 percent of women of child bearing age did not want to have more children. As a result of current population dynamics and economic pressure which forces mothers to be away from their babies most of the times, mothers no longer practise African's most effective birth control techniques - breast-feeding which help to prevent conception to some women by inhibiting ovulation. Traditionally, mothers breast-fed their babies for nearly two years, thereby spacing out pregnancies. Today, babies are breastfed for just a few months. Other problems associated with lack of practising family planning are that: some husbands fear that if their wives use contraceptives, they would be involved in prostitution; for other men, having more children gives then a big name even when they do not help them; many parents also fear the side effects associated with the use of contraceptives. According to Murphy(1985) world population was about 47 billions.

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By the year 2,000 this population is estimated to increase to about 6 billions with about 90 percent of the increase expected to be in the third world.

Food production in Africa has not been able to keep pace with population growth for some time. As of 1985, the rate of population growth exceeds food production by 1.6%. This rapid population growth is greatly increasing the number of poor and hungry people. Wallace (1985) quoting an FAO report said that one out of very five people in developing nations suffer from malnutrition. In many cases families serve unbalanced diets due to lack of enough food and in some cases women may not know how to balance the diet even when they have all the required food stuffs. When there is overproduction of certain food, storage knowledge and facilities are lacking to store the food properly in order to be used when when it is out of season. This forces the family to continually eat one kind of food before it is spoiled by storage pests or weather conditions. Other times women are too busy to take time and prepare a balanced diet.

The high population has put pressure on arable land for other purposes like residential buildings, schools, roads and industries. As a result, families are forced to turn to marginal land which requires expensive inputs like irrigation and drainage to make it productive. An example of this is Mwea Rice Irrigation Scheme and Yala Swamp. Over-population has also caused environmental degradation such as deforestation, overgrazing, soil erosion, and draught. It has affected the health and welfare of individuals and families especially the poor.

Some of the rural families are left landless and the high proportion of the landless are families headed by females. To sustain their families, such women sell their labour to their neighbours. Other families have split up their land into small parcels which are far too small to feed their families. Women and children are usually the victims of unregulated fertility (Kibaki, 1984 and vaughn, 1985). Vaughn also remarked that "too many, too close, to early and too rate pregnancies are the major causes of maternal, infant and childhood mortality and morbidity".

Brown (1985) recommended urgent steps to be taken in Africa in order to boost agricultural production and to slow down population growth so as to acquire capacity to feed its own people. He also contrasted the African food situation to that of China where per capita grain production has raisen to 30 percent since 1970. He attributed this success to halving the rate of population growth and launching extension agricultural reforms since 1970.

The average level of education of the rural people is always lower than that of urban dwellers. Hancock (1980) writing about Kenya rural literacy said that nearly 35% of men and 70% of women were illiterate. Some of those who attended school when they were young cannot read or write skills. This simply means that any kind of information given to them in written form is not helpful.

Despite their busy life, shortage of facilities and resources and the difficult working conditions, rural women in Kenya have made a remarkable contribution in all areas of social, cultural and economic life.

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Some women have joined and worked together in co-operative associations to generate money making projects. Where these projects are successful, they have proved to be of great social and economic benefits to the families and the community as a whole. The proceedings of these projects are used to purchase farm inputs, household items for home improvement, pay school fees for children and meet other urgent family needs. The projects also provide incentives and opportunities for the rural women to meet, work together exchange ideas and enjoy the company of one another. This is an indication that with enough help and incentives rural women have capacity to promote the standard of living in rural areas.

It is not a mistake to conclude by saying that rural women are the focal point of family welfare and rural development. Any plans to improve the rural situation in Kenya should therefore be channeled through them. They should also be involved in planning for rural development because they understand the rural situation more than anybody else.

## IMPLICATION FOR HOME ECONOMICS

Home Economics deals with physical, social and economic concerns of individuals and families. Most of the rural issues discussed above are Home Economics related. This calls for some actions by the Home Economics profession to define strategies to meet the needs of the rural families in Kenya. A few suggestions are listed below:-

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1. Home Economics curriculum at all levels of education should include some subsistence farming, food storage and utilization. This would help Kenyan youth and adults appreciate and participate in the role of food production and utilization and hence promote good nutrition in Kenya.

2. Home Economics curriculum should incorporate family and population concepts in all Home Economics related subjects such as Food and Nutrition, Clothing and Textiles, Home Management, Child and Family, Housing and Environment. This would help to reach many people with family planning and population education and it would help parents and potential parents realize how family size shape the social and economic conditions of the family and the country as a whole.

3. There is a need to carry out research and develop appropriate labour and time saving tools and equipment for the tasks performed by rural women both in their homes and farms. This would improve the efficiency and productivity in rural areas.

4. The training institutions offering Home Economics should develop outreach programmes as an extra curriculum activity to visit and educate the rural community around the institutions.

5. Home Economics should be flexible to accomodate the rising family and individual issues related to Home Economics both in its training program and its services.

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6. When dealing with an area that is as comprehensive as rural families welfare, a proper co-ordination and integration within all the government and non-government agencies working for rural development is needed in order to avoid wasting of resources and minimize duplication and confusion that would be created in the field.

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